

WEST METRO

Orono votes to break from Long Lake Fire Department

Change to independent Orono Fire Department estimated to cost average homeowner up to \$214 more each year.

By Josie Albertson-Grove (<https://www.startribune.com/josie-albertson-grove/10010118/>) Star Tribune

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Orono's city council voted to split from the Long Lake Fire Department to form its own department, an undertaking that the city estimates will cost between \$12 and \$17 million over the next decade, and would increase property taxes for an average-value home between \$88 and \$214 every year.

Leaders in the city of about 8,000 on Lake Minnetonka have been talking about breaking away from the neighboring Long Lake Fire Department for years, with the mayor and some council members saying they believed Orono pays too much for Long Lake's service, and Orono could run the department better.

Monday's 3-1 vote, with Mayor Dennis Walsh and Council Members Richard F. Crosby II and Matthew Johnson for, Council Member Alisa Benson against and one council seat vacant (<https://www.startribune.com/orono-fire-department-long-lake-needs-assessment-city-council/600276991>), was made without any more public comment or debate between the council members.

"We've had enough discussion," Walsh said. He was met with raucous boos from the audience. Concern that the process has been hasty and opaque has led to Orono and Long Lake residents packing the last two city council meetings.

Long Lake leaders have said they see Orono's moves as a hostile takeover of the Long Lake department (<https://www.startribune.com/orono-long-lake-fire-department-mn-firefighters-ladder-truck-james-van-eyll-dennis-walsh/600272353>). Long Lake hired an attorney this year and has threatened a breach-of-contract suit, especially after Orono tried unsuccessfully to get state legislation passed to take control of Long Lake's fire department pension funds.

On Monday, Orono reiterated the plan to take over the Navarre fire station by summer 2024 and begin covering part of Orono with the newly-created Orono Fire Department — which Long Lake's attorney has said would be a clear breach of the contract.



JEFF WHEELER, STAR TRIBUNE FILE

Orono Mayor Dennis Walsh led the City Council meeting on Feb. 13, 2023, at Orono City Hall. The council voted on Monday, June 12, 2023, to

Other than the Orono chief, hired away from Long Lake in late 2022, Orono has not started hiring firefighters.

"We're prepared to take all Long Lake firefighters," Crosby said Monday. He said he thought firefighters could serve on both departments at the same time.

The vote was also made just before the council voted to appoint Maria Veach to the council, after former Council Member Victoria Seals' sudden resignation last month (<https://www.startribune.com/orono-fire-department-long-lake-needs-assessment-city-council/600276991/>).

Like Seals, Veach is married to a Long Lake firefighter. The council took the vote without discussing other candidates. Veach was the only person who applied who did not participate in public interviews earlier Monday afternoon, because she was on vacation.

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